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Third-degree Byrne: a pop Renaissance man of many words, rhythms, and, now, via his first film, cinematic moves.

THINKING HEAD

TRUE OR FALSE: THE MOST IRREPRESSIBLE ROCK STAR TODAY CAN ALSO WRITE, DIRECT, AND CO-STAR IN A POP MOVIE THAT BREAKS ALL THE RULES. TRUE STORY.

DAVID BYRNE

BY JOHN HOWELL

David Byrne, lead singer and songwriter for the rock group Talking Heads, who was once called "the thinking man's rock star," is about to become an entertainment conglomerate. The occasion is the October release of *True Stories*, a deadpan but sincere feature film—actually a musical mock-documentary—which Byrne directed, acted in, and co-wrote with playwright Beth Henley and actor/director Stephen Tobolowsky. Also part of the package: *True Stories*, a Talking Heads album with nine Byrne songs, and a book, *True Stories* (Viking), which includes the screenplay, stills, and local-color photographs by William Eggleston, noted for his you-are-there photo-vignettes of Southern vernacular culture.

For Byrne, a feature film is the logical leap after *Stop Making Sense*, a Talking Heads concert film (named Best Documentary of 1984 by the National Society of Film Critics), and the group's consistently outstanding music videos (awarded a 1985 MTV citation). It's also a logical progression for the 33-year-old Byrne, who pursued visual arts at Rhode Island School of Design: He's getting visual again.

For over a decade the Talking Heads' intelligent "art rock" has revolutionized the way America thinks about rock stars. (Hey, they're smart!) Last year, their aggressively original *Little Creatures* album, a buffet of musical styles from rock to country to Cajun gospel, was the critics' choice for Album of the Year by *Rolling Stone* and *The Village Voice*. All the while David Byrne was also obsessed with making pictures—motion pictures.

The germ of *True Stories* was newspaper clippings Byrne collected from lowbrow mass-circulation tabloids; clippings about strange characters: the Laziest Woman in the World, a Lying Woman, a Couple Who Haven't Spoken to Each Other in 31 Years—all denizens of Virgil, Texas, an *Our Town* of the Eighties. It's a community preparing to acknowledge 150 years of statehood with a "Celebration of Specialness." To portray the stories' unusual characters, he assembled an equally unusual cast including stage and film actress Swoosie Kurtz, gospel musician Roebuck "Pops" Staples, monologist Spalding Gray, and performance artist Jo Harvey Allen.

Byrne, who was born in Scotland and grew up outside Baltimore, wanders through this "pseudo-documentary" of small-town eccentricity as the Narrator, a sort of amazed Mister Rogers in a *National Enquirer*-like landscape of weird lives. As his concert groupies already know, and movie-goers are about to discover: The music man can act.

Byrne's tightrope act between pop music and avant-garde performance (he has collaborated both with choreographer Twyla Tharp and experimental theater director Robert Wilson) has set the stage for this cross between "an MTV video and a Broadway musical" compounded from equal parts Americana and sophisticated aesthetic concepts. In 1978, Byrne sang about average American life, claiming that "I wouldn't live there if you paid me to" ("The Big Country"). This time he's back, reinventing the very notion of idiosyncratic American ways of life.

The never-married Byrne has of late been keeping company with Adele Lutz, a model-turned-costume designer and the sister of socialite restaurateur Tina Chow. And has turned in his celebrated big white suit for something slicker, sort of "designer Fred Astaire." Clearly, he is also changing gears—during this interview, he took one phone call from Robert Wilson. ("A stage/film work in 1988?" we hear him say. "Sure.") This December Byrne may well be at Lincoln Center narrating *The Knee Plays*, the section of Wilson's much-touted *CIVIL WarS* for which Byrne composed music. Seems even the colossal enterprise of rock can no longer contain the protean energies of David Byrne.

Scene: a San Francisco studio where Byrne is adding last-minute incidental music to *True Stories*. Although he's under heavy deadline pressure, he answers a wide range of questions—framing them all in terms of the movie—laughs easily, and speaks seriously about what is surely his most popular entertainment to date; clearly his most personal.

Q. You've referred to two very different sources for *True Stories*: the theater director Robert Wilson and the sensationalist tabloid *The Weekly World News*. How did those two influences come together for you?

A. I never thought about why the two together. That's a tough one. [Laughter.] Well, *The Weekly World News* tends to have stories that aren't really

news, just odd stories. Some of the characters in the film were inspired by these articles.

Q. Are the people in the paper real?

A. We didn't really ask if they'd made stuff up or not. Occasionally, the *News* would volunteer information like, "We don't know if you can say that; that's a real person." Which is a kind of backwards admission that maybe some of their articles aren't based on real people.

Q. How did Wilson's theater influence this raw material?

A. I've seen the way he works, and the way the Mabou Mines theater and the Wooster Group work too, and there's a general "cut-and-paste" construction method in their theater pieces, a lot of elements cut and pasted together to serve an overall structure rather than a story like conventional theater work. That's the way I write songs—collect a lot of stuff, then put it into verses and choruses. I felt at home working that way.

Q. Do you think of using such different sources as a way of escaping typical movie conventions?

A. It can be a device to get away from stuff, and to make the whole thing have a broader field of reference, to refer to a whole world, not just a couple of people.

Q. *True Stories* is almost an epic, isn't it? There's a large cast of characters with the scenes set in various symbolic locales in a small town: a factory, a church, a rich man's house, a nightclub. In your first song for the Talking Heads, "Psycho Killer," the point of view is from inside one peculiar person's head. Now you're presenting an entire social panorama of "different" folks. Are you trying to step outside your own persona again?

A. If I sit down to write a song and ask myself, "What do I want to say?" I find it really difficult to do. But it's easy if I put myself in someone else's shoes and say, "What would this person feel strongly about?" It takes away the responsibility for my actions—somebody else can do it.

Q. You've described *True Stories* as a hybrid of MTV and a musical on Broadway. Is this a new movie-musical form?

A. I'm still not sure how this movie fits in. I tried to have the music come organically out of the scenes, and to put it in various musical styles that seem indigenous to where the scenes take place. At least when you see a song performed, it's in the style of music you would see in that place—from gospel to country to a shopping-mall ballad.

Q. So you wanted to avoid the cliché in which a character steps out of the action and sings away?

A. Like, guy meets girl, then he sings to the moon. I guess that tells you that he's been smitten by the girl. That has a different kind of artificiality that I didn't want. When they do that, usually they're furthering the plot or making clear some emotion. In *True Stories*, the music doesn't serve those needs but it does show you the energy that's inside these characters.

Q. To most viewers, *True Stories*' characters will seem very eccentric.

A. But very likable, I think.

Q. Do you have a clue as to how the characters learn to accept and be proud of their eccentricity?

A. In the case of the movie, it's implied that the environment encourages it: In Texas their behavior is accepted, never discouraged. There did seem to be a certain amount of proud eccentricity there. But it's not meant to be just about Texas.

Q. Does their coming to terms with their own strangeness mean that these oddballs are happier than "normal" people?

A. Well, in the movie they're all complaining about something. But they're not worried about themselves. I don't think they've chosen to be eccentric for the sake of being eccentric. When I first moved to New York, I was aware of people being eccentric to create a stir. And these people aren't like that. They do what they do because that's the way they are.

Q. At the end of the book *True Stories*, you note that you were "saddened and disappointed to have to admit that a lot of the stories are made up," but you insist, "the spirit rings true." Why is that so important?

A. I had to believe in them to really like them. If they weren't somehow "real," I think the audience would have a very limited interest in them. They would think I thought of these characters as jokes. That would turn it into a comedy that wasn't kind, which was getting laughs at people's expense. I think it's possible to laugh at these people, but like them at the same time. The fact that the movie is given a pseudo-documentary feeling is meant to reinforce the fact that this is a real place, that it's really happening out there.

Q. You've conceived this film, rehearsed and directed it, yet your char-

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acter, the Narrator, acts very wide-eyed on screen, as if he'd never seen what's going on before. Sort of a modern-day Candide. Was that difficult to do?

A. It's a fun way to be. I guess I'm a little bit like that, so I didn't feel I was really acting that much.

Q. Your Narrator is reminiscent of the narrator in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. Did you study that role?

A. When the movie script was in its third draft, someone said I should really read it before I went much further, so I did. And I watched the movie, too. I liked it a lot, though it was sentimental. As the Narrator, I tried to recede to let the other characters come forward.

Q. *True Stories* is extremely funny, yet it's not comedy of black humor.

A. The presentation is deadpan so the humor is dry. There's very rarely any out-and-out jokes though there's lots of things that are funny.

Q. What appeals to you about that kind of humor?

A. When you watch something with that kind of humor, it's like you're slipping into a whole way of looking at things, a little world view, and it affects the way you see everything when you leave the theater.

Q. What did you discover about moviemaking in the course of directing *True Stories*?

A. That you have to build a whole new world and populate it, that you have to look at everything down to the smallest detail. That I liked it a lot.

Q. In the book's preface, you write: "For years we've been taught not to like things. Finally somebody said it was okay to like things. This was a great relief." Why?

A. I think it probably had to do with my getting a little bit older. I believe that when you're an adolescent, going through college, just growing up, you have a period when you're trying to figure out what it is you like and don't like, how you're going to be and how you're not going to be. So you spend a lot of time putting other things down. That helps define who you are. After that's settled, you have some sense of how you fit in or don't fit in, whatever your relationship is with the rest of the world. Then you can like everything again.

Q. And you want everyone to feel that way about the movie?

A. A lot of this movie is me looking at things and saying, "Here's people doing things in a completely different way and maybe that's all right." □